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Volume 'Seven

TOM, MY PEACOCK

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Young Tom was now a truly magnificent specime
Frontispiece]

TOM, MY PEACOCK

Being the Adventures of General Thomas
Peacock, his rival Black Joe, and of his
son Young Tom Told by

FRANCES PITT

AUTHOR OF "MOSES, MY OTTER," "ANIMAL MIND," "WILD LIFE
STUDIES," "WATERSIDE CREATURES," "SHETLAND PIRATES,"
"WOODLAND CREATURES," AND "WILD CREATURES
OF GARDEN AND HEDGEROW"

WITH 21 PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR



LONDON :: ARROWSMITH :: W.C.1

First published in 1928

*Printed in Great Britain by
J. W. Arrowsmith Ltd., 11 Quay Street, Bristol*

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TOM, MY PEACOCK

CHAPTER ONE

THE ARRIVAL OF THE GENERAL

IT was a spring day when the General came, when General Thomas Peacock, familiarly known as Old Tom, arrived to take possession of us, and lord it over the garden and farmyard worlds, over ducks and fowls, the cats, dogs, and us humans too.

His story begins with a sudden ambition that possessed me to have some peafowl. My people were doubtful about it, and remarked that they understood that peacocks and peahens were not good for a garden ; in fact, they did their best to discourage the idea, saying we had plenty of live

TOM, MY PEACOCK

stock already, what with pets of one kind and another, and my two great friends, Madame Moses and Tom Otter, in particular. I pointed out that our garden was nothing extraordinary (not the kind you throw open to the public on high-days and holidays, charging a shilling per head for admittance, and securing thereby huge sums for charity), and that in any case peacocks would be far more ornamental than flower beds. Personally I like flowers, but I like interesting birds and beasts much better. My father and mother looked doubtful, and murmured that it was not flowers, but cabbages that they were thinking of ! Not being a dutiful daughter, I said, " Hang the cabbages ! The birds won't be kept in the kitchen-garden." Alas ! How little we can foresee the future ; it is the kitchen-garden which has become the headquarters of the peacock clan ! Moreover, I did not know then that you cannot dictate to peafowl where they will live, because they please themselves, and do what they like, without any regard for you. They

THE ARRIVAL OF THE GENERAL

are birds of character and decision, not to say most pig-headed obstinacy, and when they make up their minds to go anywhere they just go.

But this is getting on too fast, for neither the General nor his ladies have been introduced as yet. I found them, in company with others of their kind, at a farm some six miles off, where a "muster" of peafowl had long been kept.

"Muster" was the term used in days of old to denote a company of peafowl, and here there really was a muster, for no less than seven or eight fine gentlemen, and a dozen or more soberly-clad ladies were strolling about the farmstead. What an incongruous sight that was, the incomparable splendour of those stately birds in the straw-littered, muddy surroundings of an ordinary stack-yard. It did not seem right, it did not seem fitting; their proper surroundings were the well-kept lawns of some old mansion, with clipped yews, and a fine Elizabethan house in the background. And when *I made inquiries I found it was from such a home*

TOM, MY PEACOCK

that they had originally come. Their owner had received a pair as a wedding present some forty-five years before, and these original birds had come from a beautiful historical mansion in Wiltshire. But it was a far cry from that "stately home" to the Shropshire farmstead; however, the peafowl had flourished among the fowls, geese and turkeys, and here they were, a noble sight, and one that made me covetous.

I had brought my mother with me to see the birds, and to other daughters about to acquire live stock I must drop a hint: always take your parent with you to help choose, get him, or her, thoroughly interested, and then evaporate at the critical moment. In this instance it worked admirably. I picked out the birds, choosing which I fancied, while mother did the other part, the part parents do so well, that necessary part that consists of paying for the goods!

But that did not alter the fact that they were my peafowl, not in the least, for had I not selected

THE ARRIVAL OF THE GENERAL

them ? It was Old Tom, otherwise General Thomas Peacock, that I chose, and Jane, later called Old Jane.

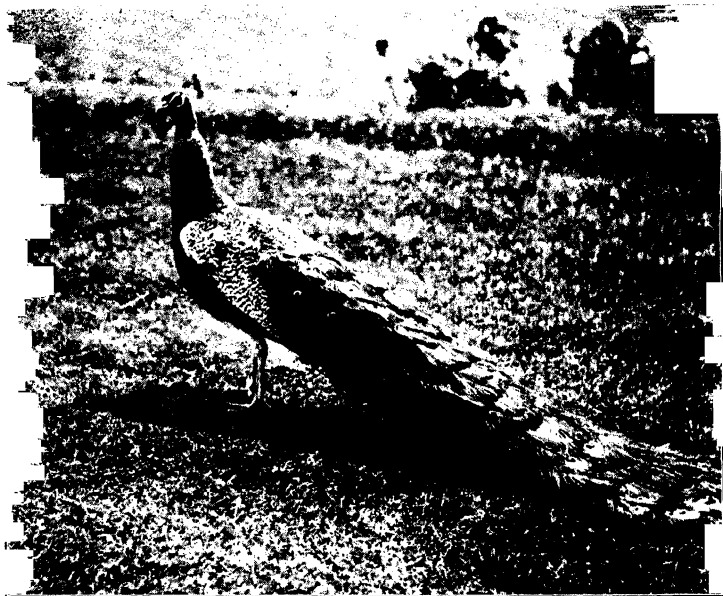
Now here it will be necessary to pause a moment to describe the different types of peafowl, as otherwise my story will not be intelligible. The ordinary peafowl is the Indian or blue peacock, the cock having the wonderful iridescent blue neck we know so well. There is also a larger, darker peafowl that comes from Burma. It is a distinct species, having a larger crest on its head, a green neck, and tinted "kid" round the eye. By "kid" I mean the bare skin about the eyes, which looks just like part of a kid glove. In the Indian peafowl this skin is white. In the Burmese it is prettily coloured with yellow and green. The Burmese peafowl is seldom brought over to Europe, and I only mention it because of the Dark Lady, who comes on the scene towards the end of this history.

More important for my story is that dark variety of the common peafowl, variously known

TOM, MY PEACOCK

as the dark-shouldered peacock, the japanned, or the Japanese peacock. It has not, nor never has had, anything to do with Japan, being a freak, or variety, that arose many years ago among a flock of ordinary peafowl, and the name "Japanese" is therefore misleading. It is a queer bird, because the old cock is so much darker than the common cock, but the hen is always lighter than an Indian hen, and the chicks, both cockerels and pullets, begin life as quite white youngsters (whereas common chicks are brown), and it takes the young cocks more than three years to become dark. It is curious to watch the young birds changing colour, and getting darker and darker at each moult. In the typical Indian peacock the shoulders are beautifully barred and mottled (see the picture of Old Tom), but in these freakish dark birds the shoulders become a rich greeny-black. The photograph of Young Tom shows a fine example of one of these dark peacocks.

Handsome as the dark birds are, I consider the typical ones still better-looking, and when I saw



*Old Tom was a grand fellow in his stately majesty of
gorgeous plumes, trailing a yard and a half of
train behind him*

THE ARRIVAL OF THE GENERAL

Old Tom—he had not got a name then—I fell in love with him at once. He was a grand fellow, in his stately majesty of gorgeous plumes, trailing a yard and a half of train behind him, a train that was a gleaming wonder of eyed patterns and glittering colours. There were other cocks too, speckled-shouldered ones and dark-shouldered ones, all magnificent as only peacocks can be, but not one, so I thought, to equal the General. As I

indignities of the journey, but otherwise none the worse. Now it was that they received their names, Jane being dubbed “Jane” because it was a

TOM, MY PEACOCK

comfortable sort of name that seemed to suit her and Tom getting his designation because "Tom" is such a useful name by which to call anything; but as we have sundry other "Toms," from my beloved Thomas Romeo Grievous Otter to the kitten of the same name and Tommy the Hyrax, he had to have a distinguishing title. What could be better than "the General"? When he stood up, his shining blue neck extended, dark breast well out, and great train extended behind him, he looked more like an emperor than a mere general, but he showed signs of being a warrior bold, and we felt the title would do, so General Thomas Peacock he became and has remained.

There is not much to be said by way of introducing Jane; she was a placid, easy-going bird, and only occupied a subsidiary position when the General was by. Women really do not count much where the men-folk are such splendid fellows as Old Tom, in his flashing glory of blue, green, and eyed train.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE GENERAL

The two having arrived, our troubles began. Little had I guessed what a weary business it would be getting Tom and wife to settle down in their new quarters. The General did not like being torn from his hearth and home, and he wanted to get back ; what is more, he made up his mind he would do so. There is an old saying, " As foolish as a peacock," but never was there anything more misleading. Peafowl are far from being fools, and for sheer pig-headed determination I know no creature, feathered or furred, to beat them. The General was no exception to the rule, so he proceeded to walk. First he and Jane walked off across the fields in a north-westerly direction, but one of the farm-men drove them home. Then he tried an expedition up the drive and off down the highway, but the groom discovered that Thomas had gone and fetched him back. Then he walked to the south, then to the north, then one way, then another, and as often as he was brought back he started forth again. My mother spent hours

TOM, MY PEACOCK

watching the two peafowl, but there was one dreadful morning when we thought Thomas really had eluded us. He was nowhere to be found. Jane, never so great a pedestrian as Tom, was sunning herself by the drawing-room window, but *the General had disappeared*. “*That stupid old bird is gone again !*” I cried, and mobilised our staff to search for him.

It is a queer thing that though peafowl can fly quite well (and what a sight it is to see one on the wing, sailing over like an aeroplane) they do *not* use their wings when they wish to travel, but merely walk. And they can walk too ! In fact, they are first-class pedestrians, or as one of our men put it, “They are right good on their feet !”

The day I am writing of, when Tom vanished from the scene, I really thought he had walked for ever ; search as we would we could not find him. We walked far and we walked wide, everybody looking for the elusive bird and murmuring

THE ARRIVAL OF THE GENERAL

hard things about peafowl in general and Thomas Peacock in particular.

By the way, there is a common idea that birds and beasts always know their way home, that they know by instinct which way to go back when taken from the place where they were born and bred, but in the case of the peacock this is certainly wrong. Despite the deep attachment peafowl have for their home, despite their efforts to return, they never know which way to go. Tom's old home was but six miles off as "the crow flies," but he walked off in every direction save the right one, and this was even more marked in the case of Rachel, the greatest walker of all, who joined us later on.

Well, we hunted and hunted for our runaway Thomas, and then someone spied a large three-toed foot-print in a muddy gateway. "He has gone through here!" the finder cried, and we tried in that direction, making finally towards the woods.

TOM, MY PEACOCK

There was a large thicket of rhododendrons in the covert, now a mass of flowers, so that a perfect blaze of purple and magenta greeted the eye, glowing against the woodland greenery in the most vivid colouring. By those glowing bushes someone caught a *glimpse*, a mere *flash*, of peacock blue. "There he is!" they shouted, and there he was, standing against a background of rhododendrons, his own wondrous hues magnificent against the flaming pinks and purples of the piled-up blossoms of the shrubs. Never did his ancestors in far-off India display their beauties against a more fitting background.

But all we said was, "Thank goodness, we have found you, Thomas; now come along home," and home the General had to come.

CHAPTER TWO

THE GENERAL MAKES HIMSELF AT HOME

THAT trip to the woods seemed to satisfy the General's wish to travel, or rather to find his way back to his old quarters, and he proceeded to settle down, make himself thoroughly at home, and take possession of us.

Jane, his wife, had already done this. From the first she had seemed better contented, quite approving of our arrangements for her comfort, and showing little disposition to roam. In fact, she showed far more inclination to visit the back-yard, make herself pleasant to the cook, and gather tasty morsels. This was poaching on the territory and perquisites of Joe Raven, who did not like it at all. Joe has lived for many years in our back-yard, making his headquarters in the

TOM, MY PEACOCK

coal-hole, whence he raids the back kitchen (the cook has been heard to declare that he is a “ perfect devil, and ought to have been named Satan ”) or goes out into the stable-yard and up the kitchen garden. Now Joe, quite naturally, felt wrath when he saw a large, strange bird invading his premises, and, what was worse, receiving many dainties which he would have liked to have had himself. His black eyes gleamed wickedly, he put all his feathers on end, and with harsh croaks hopped side-ways towards the stranger ; but she did not give ground ; instead, she put up *her* feathers, made funny little croaking sounds, and prepared to give battle.

Joe looked surprised, painfully surprised, but he abused her all the louder. However, Joseph is a clever bird, a very wise one indeed, so he did not push matters too far ; instead, he used considerable bad language and danced to and fro just out of Madame Jane’s reach. Jane, being of a peaceful nature, ignored his unseemly remarks,

THE GENERAL MAKES HIMSELF AT HOME

and turned her attention to the bits of cheese, for Jane, then as always, had an eye for the main chance.

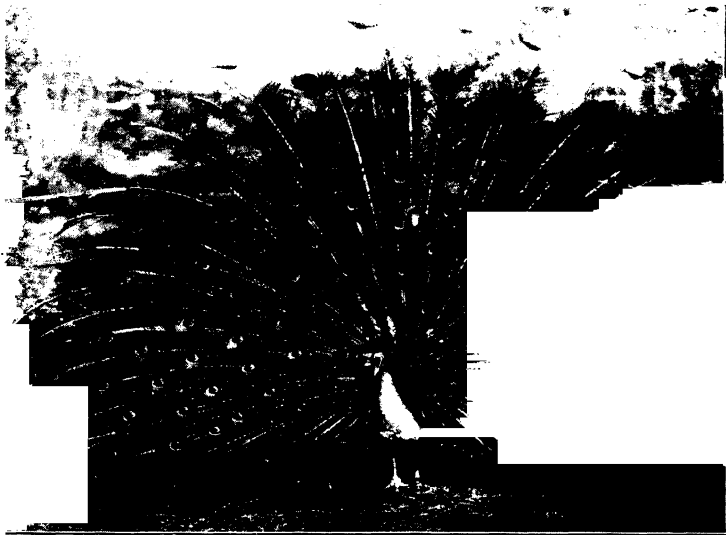
The General, for all his stately appearance, was equally prone to cadging bits at the back door, and the front one too when it proved productive. He even walked into the hall one morning, and when hustled out, nearly swept the inkstand off the writing table with the swing of his long train. In fact, when Tom made himself at home he made himself properly and thoroughly so, and his "swank" was a joy to watch. His stately swagger, the magnificent way he bullied the cats, and the air with which he pecked them on the nose was simply superb. All our world was his stage: he lorded it imperially over dogs, cocks, hens, and, as I have said, cats. To dub him a mere general had been a great mistake, for his airs were those of an emperor. However, the name had been given, and it stuck to him, though it was nearly changed the day that he erected his fan for the first time,

TOM, MY PEACOCK

and stood surrounded by a shimmering blaze of coloured light, in a gorgeous halo, some five foot high, of quivering feathered eyes, as if asking for our approval and the admiration of the hens.

No, the word "hens," in the plural, is *not* a slip of the pen, for at the time of Tom's last trip, when he wandered away into the woods, I had come to the conclusion that his restlessness was partly due to his craving for company, for the peacock clan from which he had been torn, and that another lady might help him to settle down, so I got Madame Grey Hen.

Grey Hen was an almost white bird, quite different in appearance from Jane, and belonged to the *P. nigripennis* race (to use the scientific name for the black-shouldered peacock). Tom and Jane greeted her as an old friend, and the former seemed mightily pleased to have another wife before whom to display his finery, with whom he could stroll



*Old Tom stood surrounded by a shimmering blaze of
coloured light, in a glorious halo, some five feet
high, of quivering feathered eyes*

THE GENERAL MAKES HIMSELF AT HOME

about, and in whose company he could retire to roost at night.

It was a strange thing that from the first night of their arrival the peafowl took up their quarters in a large old walnut tree at the back of the house, using precisely the same branches that had been previously occupied by peafowl in my grandmother's time, some thirty-six years before. When she kept a peacock and hens they always roosted in this tree, and now Tom and wife straightway chose it from dozens of other large and apparently equally suitable trees. Wherein lay its attraction I could not see, for it was a bare and exposed tree, liable to bend and shake in every wind. Yet however rough the night the peafowl never failed to resort to it, flying up into its topmost branches, where they settled down to brave the elements, and sleep through wind and rain.

Of course, there were plenty of buildings where Tom, Jane, and Grey Hen could have found shelter and comfort, but peafowl are such

TOM, MY PEACOCK

independent people that they will not go under cover. It is the most difficult thing to drive a peacock into a shed, and as for getting our three indoors at night, that was out of the question. They would not go in, and, if we tried to make them do so, immediately flew over our heads. They seemed to think they knew their own business best, and were certainly determined to go their own way ; what is more, they did so ! They managed comfortably without our interference, and twelve months drifted quietly by without any exciting incidents.

Sometimes the General had to stand on his dignity, and even administer punishment to presumptuous outsiders. For instance, there was the White Wyandotte cockerel, who thought himself a fine fellow. Down in the farmyard he fancied himself considerably, being more than a match for the other cocks, and lording over a harem of meek hens. Now Tom and his ladies were fond of visiting the back premises, and

THE GENERAL MAKES HIMSELF AT HOME

especially the rick-yard, but they did not take any notice of the fowls, or condescend to acknowledge their existence. Whether this cool indifference annoyed the young cock, or whether it was just over-weening self-importance that caused him to accost General Thomas Peacock, I cannot say, but these are the facts—the General was feeding peacefully on the top of a rick under the Dutch barn, when the Wyandotte flew up, stood in front of the peacock, and challenged him. The white cock lowered his head, ruffled up his neck hackles, and prepared to spar. Thomas gazed at him for a moment or two with a steady, amazed stare—such impudence was unbelievable ! Then his head shot out in the lightning quick lunge of the peacock, and he gave the Wyandotte such a blow on the head that he staggered reeling away. Certainly that cock deserved all he got, and he was never seen to interfere with any of the peafowl again, let alone challenge the General to duel.

Some people give peafowl a bad reputation for

TOM, MY PEACOCK

attacking other birds, but I believe the cocks are only spiteful when one is kept in solitary state without a wife to console his loneliness, or a young bird is chased by the other cocks. The first time I saw bad temper among our birds was when Young Jenny (of whom more later) was bereaved of her family, to the temporary detriment of her temper, her loss making her exceedingly spiteful.

As for the General and his two wives, they were very well behaved, Thomas being a perfect gentleman in all respects, never interfering with anybody unless they interfered with him. He made himself respected, it is true, as in the case of the Wyandotte cock, and the cats when they snatched his food. The peafowl were fond of soaked dog-biscuit, and when they saw me taking the dog food to the kennels, always followed to see what they could get. The cats, too, ran at the sight of the dog-food bucket, so I soon had a following of two or three peafowl, four or five cats, and perhaps a tame wild

THE GENERAL MAKES HIMSELF AT HOME

duck or two. Then, as I started to distribute bits, the fun began, each piece of biscuit being raced for, sometimes a cat being the winner and sometimes a peafowl. But when Tom lost he did not like it, and would lunge like a flash at the cat, giving her such a shrewd peck on the nose, right on the tender tip, that poor puss generally dropped her loot, and sprang back with an outraged and indignant spit. The two hens were not quite so quick at dealing with cats, but they too kept them in order, so that the unfortunate cats had good cause to hate the peafowl, for whom they were no match.

Twelve months or more passed peacefully and uneventfully, save for such minor episodes as the above, while the General became more and more the monarch of all he surveyed, supreme and magnificent, strutting in wondrous array of glittering orbs upon the lawn; while his wives amused themselves as wives should, making nests, laying eggs, and bringing up chicks. Madame

TOM, MY PEACOCK

Grey Hen reared a solitary youngster, Young Tom of future history ; and Jane brought up a son and a daughter. The former does not concern us much, he was exchanged for a hen from the south of England, Rachel by name, who will figure later in these pages ; but the pullet, Young Jenny, is another matter, she became a lady of consequence in the peafowl world, and her advent must not be overlooked.

So the season waxed and waned, in happy domestic business, and Tom strutted proudly through it all, seeming as if he delighted in his splendour, eagerly displaying it at every opportunity, and seeming to radiate happy importance. Here he was, his world his own, no one to dispute his lordship, no one to interfere with him, no one to question his right to put up his great fan or display it upon the lawn or in the stack-yard.

And all the while his mistress was meditating treachery, the importation of a villain of the deepest

THE GENERAL MAKES HIMSELF AT HOME

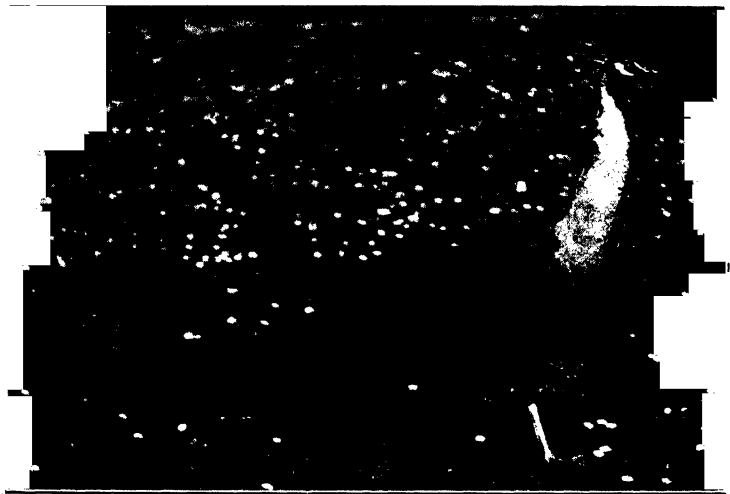
dye, a disturber of his peace, a blackamoor, a peacock of the black-shouldered type—in other words, Black Joe.

CHAPTER THREE

THE COMING OF BLACK JOE

BLACK JOE'S owner was leaving the neighbourhood, and did not know what to do with him, so he offered him to me. Having a constitutional inability to say "no" to any creature furred and feathered, I, after some hesitation, accepted him. The hesitation was because I had a shrewd idea that Tom would not welcome another cock, and my doubts were justified, for he gave the new-comer the kind of welcome that is described as a "hot reception."

Joseph was brought over, and turned out upon the lawn, where he looked rather disturbed and upset after his journey, yet a fine and handsome fellow all the same. He was, as I have hinted, a dark cock, his wings and shoulders being of a deep



*A villain of the deepest dye . . . a blackamoor, a peacock
of the black-shouldered type—in other words,
Black Joe*

THE COMING OF BLACK JOE

green-black, satin-like in texture, that enhanced the blue of his neck, the greens of his back, and the many hues of his train. In Tom's eyes he was evidently a villain of blackest dye. The General was highly indignant. What! Another cock! A stranger! On his territory! He would see about that, and he stalked up to the stranger holding his head and neck at that peculiar angle which always means mischief. Now Joe had been leading a happy, carefree bachelor existence, without wives or rivals, the sole occupier of a nice garden, so he was not in training to fight a duel with the outraged General. Moreover, he was upset by the journey, and last but not least he was, and felt himself to be, a stranger in a strange land. He had nothing to fight for, and all he desired was to live and let live, so he moved off, but Tom walked after him. Joe went on, and Tom strode at his heels, or, to be accurate, just at the end of his train. Wherever the new peacock went Tom followed always close behind him, almost stepping

TOM, MY PEACOCK

on his tail, with the light of battle gleaming from his little dark eyes and determination written on every feather. He was going to chase this stranger away, he was not going to have any nonsense, no black villain making himself agreeable to his hens, or poaching on his place, the spot where he reigned so happily. At last poor hustled Joe broke into a run, when Tom ran likewise, his long feathers streaming behind, and the procession of two had the ridiculous appearance of two old ladies picking up their skirts and running to catch a train. Joe ran this way and that, but dodge, turn, and twist as he would Tom was always at his heels. His beak was open, his breath came in quick pants, but Thomas was in no better case, for good living had spoilt his sprinting powers, yet he stuck grimly to the stern chase. Had he a vision of a future rival, or even a vision of the day when the tables would be turned, or was he merely acting on principle, the principle "I won't have another cock here at any price"?

THE COMING OF BLACK JOE

I fancy it was the latter, that angry emotion surged through him at the sight of the stranger, and he felt he must drive him off. He certainly did his best, for, though both birds were almost done, he pulled himself together and yet raised a run. But Joe could run no farther. There was a brier bush near at hand, and he flung himself into it, crept beneath the prickly, thorny barricade, and lay exhausted.

Then the General's strength seemed renewed, he turned about, strutted to some rising ground, and shrieked his triumph. How he yelled, his screams might have been heard a mile away. But his triumph was short-lived, for I interfered. Black Joe had come to stay, and this sort of a reception had got to be stopped. My sympathy was with Tom, he was undoubtedly badly used; but there was the situation, so with bits of cheese (a peafowl will sell its soul for cheese !) I tempted him towards a shed, lured him inside, and banged the door upon him. From his prison the victor

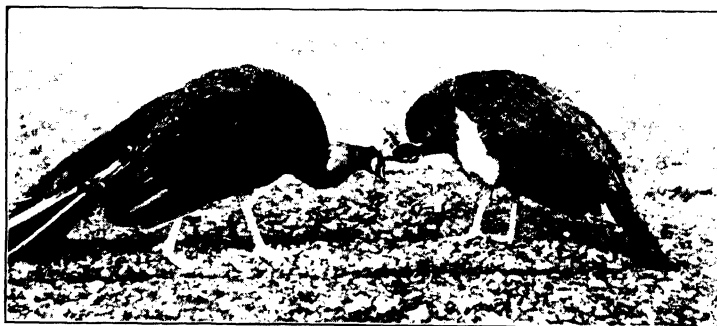
TOM, MY PEACOCK

saw the vanquished come forth from the brier bush, preen his feathers, put his dishevelled plumage to rights, and stroll across the lawn. Then poor Tom saw something else, something far worse, for from his prison window he viewed Jane, his wife, give Black Joe the kiss of peace and welcome.

Peafowl have a peculiar custom of greeting each other with a gentle peck upon the white kid-like skin around the eye. Jane and Madame Grey Hen looked at the stranger, walked up to him, and inspected him with long and doubtful stares. It must have been rather embarrassing for Black Joe, but he endured their scrutiny, and went on preening himself, after which he shook out his train, and readjusted the feathers that had got out of place. Only when quite smart and spruce did he turn his attention to the ladies. He moved towards Jane, holding his head on one side, just like a person presenting his or her cheek. Jane hesitated for a long half-minute, and then she



The General shrieks his triumph



What the General saw from his prison window: Jane, his wife, giving Black Joe the kiss of peace and welcome

THE COMING OF BLACK JOE

kissed him ! Ever so gently did she peck Black Joe, just on the white skin beneath the eye ; and then he, she, and Grey Hen went off to feed together.

And poor General Thomas Peacock, a prisoner gazing from a window, had seen it all ! Is it any matter for surprise that he was still further embittered ? Or that when released from durance vile he attacked Joe more determinedly than ever. This time Joseph was better prepared to take his own part, and the two were seen revolving slowly in the stately preliminary waltz of the peacock duel.

Peacocks, being fine gentlemen, do not go straight at one another, or fight " hammer and tongs," but begin gently, and work up to a climax. There is nothing common, or vulgar, about the business, no hasty rushing into the fray, but a stately, dignified, ceremonious working-up of emotions, until the great clash comes. To begin with, they do not face each other, but walk after one another,

TOM, MY PEACOCK

each trying to step upon the other's train, and each trying to whisk his tail out of the way, so that the duelists go round and round in a slow but giddy circle.

Tom and Joe did not get beyond this stage, because the latter had not yet got that at-home feeling which makes fighting really enjoyable and worth while. He soon turned and made off, but the General was not satisfied, he had too many wrongs on his mind, Joe's mere presence being the outstanding one, and he ran him harder than ever, up hill and down dale, around the garden and the farmstead, away over the fields, and even into the woods. The General was relentless, not to say most vindictive, and we feared he would drive Joe away. But from the first Joe had been prepared to stay ; perhaps he liked the place, or more likely found pleasure in the society of the ladies, after his long years of a lonely bachelor existence. At any rate, Black Joe endured the persecution in a truly praiseworthy manner, and Tom pushed

THE COMING OF BLACK JOE

home his advantage in a way that showed he had no thought of a day when the worm might turn, or retribution overtake him.

At this time Madame Grey Hen was the proud mother of one white chick, an insignificant youngster, of no particular promise, and in which not one of us saw the forthcoming champion of a great fight; yet could Papa Tom have looked into the future he might have trembled before his son and heir, to say nothing of treating Black Joe with greater consideration. The chick ought to have been called "Nemesis," but we merely dubbed him "Young Tom."

To the General this baby was less than nothing, and he took no note of him, merely devoting his time and attention to chasing Joe. So persistent was he, that again I lured him within doors, and shut him up to repent of his ways. For a few days Joe had a happy and peaceful time, enjoying himself with Jane and Grey Hen, despite the eye

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at the window. Tom took perch on a box, from which he could look out on the garden, and his baleful glances followed the others as they strolled to and fro. If looks could kill Joe would have been a dead bird. Instead Joe enjoyed himself, and would sit on the garden gate and scream with delight.

The old saying has it that a peacock screams to foretell rain, but like many another old story this is mere rubbish. Peafowl scream from excitement and pleasure, and make as much noise, or more, on a fine morning as when it is going to rain. The scream is also a challenge, and a means of letting the world in general know where the challenger is. Besides which the birds always screech at anything unusual, whether a sudden sound, or strange dogs and people. My brother and I can usually make Tom raise his voice. We have only got to bang a piece of tin, or shout at him, and he will yell again and again.

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But with regard to screaming at strangers, we had rather an embarrassing example of this one day when the hounds were about. They had run a fox into the wood near the house, when Tom and Joe, greatly excited at the sight of the people and horses, flew up into the walnut tree and began to scream. Screech after screech rang out, such yells as only an expert can produce, that carried far through the winter air, across meadow and woodland, and reached the huntsman's ear. In the distance it sounded just like a "Halloo," and such the huntsman thought it was. "Toot! toot! toot!" went the horn, as, swinging his horse round, he got the hounds together and galloped off towards the place where he naturally thought the fox had been seen. There was no one there, only the peacocks screeching derisively!

This, however, is wandering from the story, of Tom again in prison and Joe enjoying himself with the ladies. After keeping the former shut up for a while he was again released, but promptly

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indulged in his old ways. There was no place for Joe with Tom upon the war-path. It was only the moult which brought a truce. One July morning a few of Tom's long-eyed feathers dropped out, the next day they were coming out in handfuls. He seemed so worried and bothered about it, shaking himself, and turning around to preen his tail, when they came forth in half-dozens at a time. In a day or two his glory had fled, magnificent eyed feathers were lying unheeded on the garden paths, and Tom, but a melancholy remnant of his former self, was strolling about, not only minus his tail, but all his swagger and self-importance.

In the meantime exactly the same thing had befallen Black Joe, he too had lost his gorgeous plumes ! They say " fine feathers make fine birds," and never was there a better example of the saying. The two subdued and shabby peacocks met each other, buried their differences and their troubles, and forgave and forgot. They went about together

THE COMING OF BLACK JOE

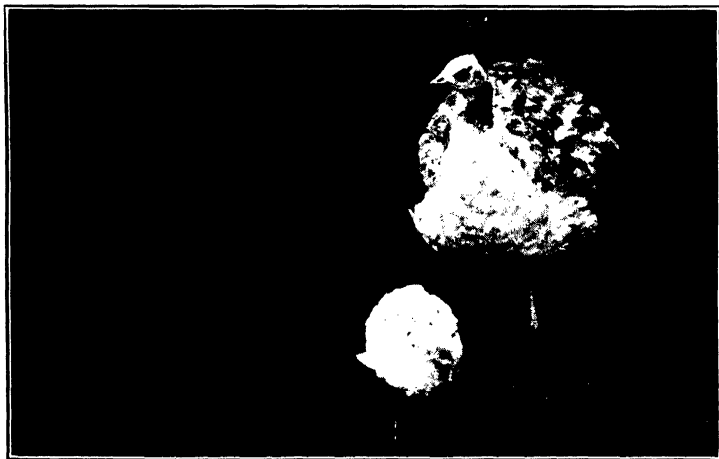
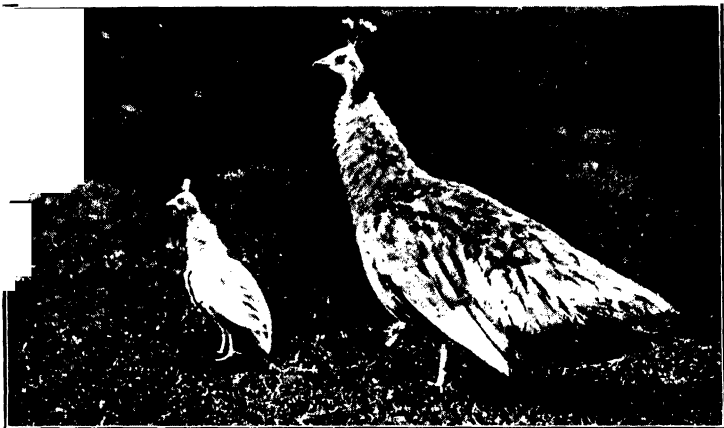
and even went expeditions over the fields together, and all was amiability and peace—for the time-being at any rate !

CHAPTER FOUR

YOUNG TOM AND HIS MOTHER

GREY HEN, as I have said, became the proud mother of one insignificant chick. It was not her fault he was an only child, but the result of troubles and misfortunes she could not help.

In the spring, when the may bushes were white with blossom and their scent hung heavy upon the air, madame went nesting. She did not seek the General's help or advice, but after the manner of peahens left him to strut in the sunshine while she went to look for a nest. She was seen about the kitchen-garden, exploring hidden nooks, such as the violet bed under the wall and the shady place behind the bay bush; but these spots did not please her, perhaps they were not private



Grey Hen was the proud mother of one insignificant chick [44

YOUNG TOM AND HIS MOTHER

enough, and she left the kitchen-garden for the bushes at the head of the garden pool. This was better, and here she finally made her nest, scraping a slight hollow at the foot of a fir tree, and laying therein five large pale eggs, faintly spotted upon the broader end with pinkish-brown.

So far all was well, and Grey Hen settled down to the weary work of sitting, only leaving her treasures for a few moments each morning to come to the house to be fed. She always let us know when she was there, her loud cries, 'twixt the clucking of a broody hen and the shriek of the peafowl, being enough to wake the dead !

How she hurried over her meal, hastily picking up grain, bits of bread and any dainties we threw her, ere hasting back to duty ! It always amused me to see her running off, her neck feathers fluffed out like a ruffle, and anxious worry depicted in her mien.

Now, my readers may remember the story of *Moses*, *My Otter*, and that Madame Moses had a

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sister, Miss Aaron, a wilful young lady who ran away to join a wild otter, but sometimes returned in the night-time to revisit her old haunts. Aaron, it will also be remembered, was a sportswoman, by which I mean she would hunt anything that swam, ran, or flew. She thought nothing of running the cats up the trees and of catching moorhens and rabbits.

Well, very early one morning, after Grey Hen had been sitting about a fortnight, there was an outcry in the garden. It was just at the break of day, as the sky was paling to lemon in the east, and the dew-sodden grass shone silvery in the coming light. Shriek after shriek rang out, and my brother, looking out of his bedroom window, spied Grey Hen racing across the lawn, shrieking "murder! murder!" for all she was worth. Whatever had happened it was obvious she was unhurt! But closer investigation showed she was much upset. Her neck ruffle seemed permanently fluffed out and her nerves gone to tatters. And

YOUNG TOM AND HIS MOTHER

well they might be, for a yet nearer view revealed the fact that half the feathers on her back had been pulled out.

I went to the nest. The eggs were there all right, but there were signs of a struggle and madame's missing feathers were distributed round about. Down by the pool side I found an otter's foot-print, quite fresh and evidently made but a little while before. Thereupon I credited Aaron with the deed, thinking she had scented the sitting bird, and sprung upon her, though only to grab her by the feathers of her back, which of course came away in a manner most unsatisfactory for the otter ! It is, however, quite possible that a fox was the real culprit ; but knowing my Aaron, I still think the blame was laid in the right quarter.

As for poor Madame Grey Hen, the shock had been severe. Disturbed in her comfortable slumbers by this raider of the night, she had had a fright she could not get over. She clucked, cackled and

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shrieked, and would have no more of nest or eggs—attempt number one had come to a disastrous conclusion.

However, she tried again, making a second nest, but this time chose a site farther from the pools. It was under a fir tree in a plantation near the house and was a much better spot. At any rate, it was favoured by better fortune ! There came a July day when there was life in the eggs, when Grey Hen heard wee cheepings beneath her, and the chicks began to hatch. Of the five eggs two were addled, but the other three duly chipped, cracked, fell apart and released three little white things. The chicks were like their mother. Whereas ordinary peachicks are buff coloured with brown stripes, these were all creamy white. One was a poor weakly little thing, too weakly to follow the old lady when she rose stiffly from her long vigil (the peafowl sits twenty-eight days) to lead the babies forth into the world. Oh ! with what proud tenderness did she cluck them along. If

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there were but two (number three lay dead beside the addled eggs), they were in her eyes the finest chicks the world had ever seen. She sought tit-bits for them, carefully giving the morsels to each in turn, feeding them with flies, grubs, seeds and bits of cheese. To see her holding the food and presenting it to each chick, was a study in mother-love. Then she took them to a sunny corner, to bask in the warmth, when the chicks mounted on to her back and one playfully pecked her ear. But when a shower came, how quickly she gathered them under the shelter of her wings, while evening found her convoying them back to the nest, to be cuddled and brooded during the cold hours of the night.

Never was there a more devoted mother ; in fact, Grey Hen was a model, her life now was one long devotion to those two wee chicks ; such tiny, insignificant babies, with no hint about them of coming glories, unless the merest scrap of tuft on the tops of their downy heads might be taken

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as an indication of the feathers that might one day spring therefrom.

No wonder Old Tom ignored his offspring and paid little heed to them, for who could ever believe such mites would grow up into peafowl, or that one of them was destined to become a splendid cock, a finer fellow than even the General in all his glory, and that the day would come when Papa Tom would have to take considerable note of his son and heir.

As it was, Tom went about his business untroubled by visions of the future, and actually took more interest in common farmyard chickens than in his own offspring. Any new chickens interested him immensely, and he would go to the coop and peep and peer at them. He did not hurt them, or do anything to them, but his attentions alarmed the hens, so he had to be driven away. Yet he practically ignored Grey Hen's chicks, which under her unceasing care were flourishing and growing rapidly. Their little wings developed

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fast, and their mother soon decided they must go to roost in the walnut tree. She proceeded to show them the way upstairs. When going to roost by herself she simply flew straight from the ground up to her accustomed place, but now she proceeded a step at a time. First she jumped on to a barrow, and from that to the low roof of a wood shed. These were easy steps, and the chicks followed without difficulty. Next she flew on to a higher shed, which was not quite so easy, but the bigger youngster, Young Tom to be precise, came at once ; number two was longer in following. Then mother flew into the tree, and again little Tom followed her closely. Step by step she took him up, until she had reached the chosen branch, where she sat down and Tom straightway crept under her wing, but the other chick had found the last step too difficult and was "peeping" unhappily below. The old lady clucked and clucked, until it too ventured up, fluttering its wings, landing beside her with a scramble, and

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cuddling hastily beneath the warm haven of her wing.

Let it blow, rain or hail, those babies were safe under her wings, sitting one on either side, snug and sheltered beneath their feathered tent.

So the days and weeks passed, little Tom and his sister growing faster than mushrooms, as well they might seeing how their mother cared for them, until there came a morning when it was seen that Grey Hen had only one chick with her. Where was the other? We searched far and we searched wide, until someone looked into the water-tub! It had rained over-night, the tub was full, and the peachick was floating dead on the top.

The jury at the ensuing inquest (it was composed of my mother, the cook, the stableman, and myself) returned a verdict of "found drowned," and added a rider that it "was desirable that in future water-tubs should be covered."

Thus Grey Hen was left with an only son, to whom she could devote her undivided attention.

YOUNG TOM AND HIS MOTHER

No wonder he throve apace, and waxed not only in size, but self-importance. This still diminutive chick even began to put his silly little tail up! When he met old Joe Raven or anything else that excited him, he would strut in the most ridiculous likeness of an adult peacock.

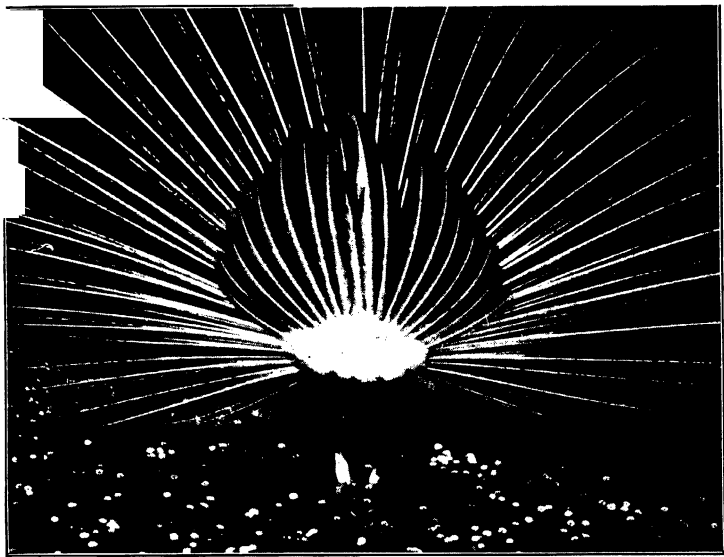
Perhaps it will be as well to digress for a moment here to explain that the wonderful fan of the peacock, the eyed halo we admire so much, is *not* its tail. The true tail consists of quite plain grey feathers, under and behind the long-eyed feathers, which later spring from the bird's back. In the photograph which shows a rear view of Old Tom the reader will see that the real tail helps to hold up the great feathers of the fan, but is only a plain affair. All the beauty is concentrated upon the elongated feathers of the rump, which are known as the peacock's "train."

People generally assume that peacocks erect their trains so as to show off their beauties, that they are very vain, and enjoy being looked at by

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their mates, persons and animals ; but those who think this cannot know that small chicks with no trains, no beauty, and only diminutive tails will put up their silly little tails just like the old birds. To see little Tom strutting at the old raven was too laughable for anything. He looked so self-important, so proud and altogether ridiculous. Even the raven made croaking noises as if laughing at him, when the peachick would quiver his feathers and strut harder than ever. He also displayed himself before the cats and the tame wild ducks, not one of whom was a whit impressed. Only his doting mother took note of his prowess.

She escorted that chick wherever he chose to wander, and the bigger he grew the prouder and fonder she appeared to become. Autumn days passed into winter ones, and still she took him to bed with her, still he followed her to roost, cuddled up to her on her favourite branch, and snuggled under her wing, so that however bad the weather he was sheltered from its violence. But all autumn



A rear view of Old Tom, showing the true tail

YOUNG TOM AND HIS MOTHER

he had been growing, and growing fast, so that by now he was almost as big as she, hence the ludicrous sight of a big cockerel, as large as the old hen, sitting beside his mother, and seeking shelter from her wing, which barely covered him. However, Grey Hen, as is the way of mothers, whether bird or human, saw nothing funny in it, and mothered her big baby as diligently as she had cuddled him when a tiny chick.

She did not seem to see he was growing up, any more than the General did, but then Old Tom never had concerned himself with his offspring !

CHAPTER FIVE

THE GENERAL, BLACK JOE AND OTHER MATTERS

HAVING told how Grey Hen brought up Young Tom, we must go back a little to take up the story of the General and Black Joe, which we left at the point where, rendered melancholy and peaceable by the moult, they had called a truce, at any rate for the time being.

Shorn of their glory, minus their beautiful trains, the two cocks became quite friendly, and even consoled each other, going about together, and walking out over the fields. Sometimes the ladies joined these expeditions, but more often the men-folk wandered off together. Even if "fine feathers make fine birds," sweeping trains are not altogether an advantage for walking, and

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the peacocks chose this time while they were without their finery for exploring the surrounding country. But however far they wandered they were home by dusk. One expedition took them on to the main road, where the General, so I was told, held up a car. A Rolls-Royce came hooting along, but Thomas was not going to hurry himself, even for a Rolls, and it had to pull up while Tom strolled sedately across the highway.

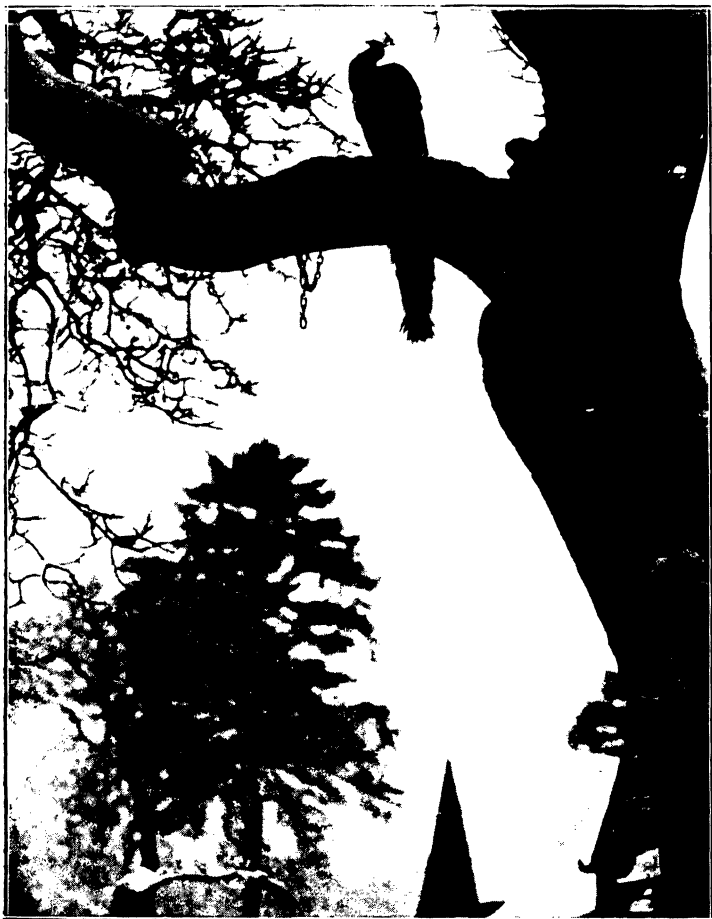
The peafowl were also reported as calling at the village public, where they had refreshments, though not the kind usually served by the inn-keeper's wife, for whatever the failings of Tom and Joe, they did not drink beer. Even in their shabby old clothes, minus their trains, they were fine fellows, and when they went to the inn door, looking expectantly into the public, no one could resist them—they received all sorts of scraps, bits of bread, cheese, etc., and in consequence called again. Hence it was that the General and Black Joe formed the bad habit of “going to the pub.”

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It was only the weather, and their feathers, that broke them of the habit. Summer days passed into autumn ones, and their new finery came thick and fast. Their trains came down, grew long, and swept the ground, dragging in the mud and slush of early winter, so that walking out was no longer a pleasure, and expeditions a thing of the past.

Winter came and went, snowy days passed, when the peafowl, too disgusted with English weather to come down, stayed aloft, each from his or her perch surveying the snowy scene. Did they think, as they moped aloft in silent disgust, that this was no country for birds clad in tropic splendour? Did they dream, as they tucked their beaks under their shoulder feathers, trying to sleep away the cold, miserable hours, of the far-off lands where their ancestors lived, where the sun poured down from a brazen sky and snow and frost were unknown?

If they did not think of such things, I thought



Too disgusted with English weather to come down

THE GENERAL AND BLACK JOE

of an account I read once, of wild peacocks strutting at the break of day on the shingle beside an Indian stream, backed by the green wall of the jungle, with above and behind the blue of distant mountains and in the foreground the glittering peacocks, birds and scene being alike bathed in golden light.

But whatever Tom, Black Joe, Grey Hen and Jane thought of things, they must have been thankful when the weather improved. If one thing looks more out of place than another it is the peacock's gorgeous finery in the dragging slush of thawing snow. Yet, however miserable the conditions, not one of the peafowl showed any wish to leave its place in the walnut tree and seek shelter in a building. Night after night they sought the same branches, each evening their majesties flew up into the tree, to perch side by side on one of the great boughs. The wives had to go up higher, to the second-best branches, for, as already hinted, women-folk only come

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second, and a bad second at that, in the peafowl world. And there they all sat, through gales, rain, hail, snow and frost—until at last the spring came !

The spring came, with sunshine and drying winds, and the peafowl began to look happier. The cocks raised their voices in the early morning and shrieked their delight, a sure sign that they were feeling cheerful, and once more they strolled around in the magnificence of full-length trains that were also clean and dry ones. Though trains were now as long as ever, peace yet reigned in the land, but how long would this happy state of things continue? And would Black Joe continue to put up with ill-treatment? So far he had endured all the old General had chosen to do to him—he had run when he was chivvied, he had kept out of the way ; but “ worms will turn,” and the question was whether Black Joe had any wriggle in him !

Only time could show ; and time passed, the



*Each evening their majesties flew up into the tree, to perch
side by side on one of the great boughs*

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spring advanced, the sun grew warmer and resplendent fans were once more erected and displayed, though the coy hens took little notice of the quivering array of eyes and paid scant heed to the rattling of quills when each cock vibrated his fan as if in the hope of drawing their attention. In fact, the cocks were filled with spring-time excitement—they shivered and quivered with emotion, and seemed deaf and blind to everything but the wish to strut and to make the hens look. The hens would not be bothered. I have seen Old Tom, his train an embracing halo of eyes, himself a quivering bundle of nerves, turning and turning, so that Grey Hen should have the best view, and all she did was to slip behind him and walk off!

Undoubtedly the whole business was trying to the temper, and the more Tom and Joe displayed their finery the less amiable they became. The General, of course, felt at complete liberty to put up his train as often as he pleased, but he did not

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like it when he caught Black Joe with his fan erect. The latter, however, was now at home, and, it appeared, no longer disposed to put up with Tom's bullying. Our suspicion that the bullied one might turn upon the bully was realised. There came a morning when Tom strolled up the kitchen-garden path, and seeing Joe showing off in the middle of the strawberry-bed—a spot he had *not* invited him to use, nor anyone else for that matter, took a step or two towards him.

The General's attitude was menacing, and twelve months previously Black Joe would have picked up his skirts and run. Now he merely lowered his fan, shook it slowly and carefully into place and stared back at Tom. Tom seemed surprised, he gazed in amazement, and looked still more startled when Joe came towards him. Did he realise that this worm of a rival cock, this down-trodden, insignificant black bird, had not only turned, but was going to wriggle quite effectively ?

THE GENERAL AND BLACK JOE

Tom evidently thought that things were not going to happen as he had expected, for he turned away; but it was no good his pretending that he had not meant it, that Joe had misunderstood, and so on, for *Joe walked after him*.

The kitchen-garden had become Joe's domain and the strawberry-bed his holy of holies. Here it was that he had his especial displaying stand, and where he spent much time with his fan quivering and blowing about him. That he pranced over the strawberry plants and did them no good is neither here nor there. My point, and his point, is that it was his own particular spot. He was much annoyed at the sight of Tom. He was filled with indignation, and with righteous anger to gird him he paced after the General. He caught him up, and Tom turned, when they began the stately preliminary revolving of a peacock duel. I have already spoken of this slow waltz, when each bird tries to step on his opponent's tail, and they go round and round until the onlooker is dizzy with

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watching them. At long last one or other sees an opportunity to fly over his rival, when there is a dazzling flash of colour as the great bird springs into the air. But the most thrilling moment is that when they fly up at the same instant and clash in mid-air.

Tom and Joe waltzed round and round, they chased each other to and fro, and then revolved again. So they went on, until their wings drooped from exhaustion and their breath came in gasps as they panted open-beaked. They were fairly evenly matched, and neither would give in. Again they waltzed. Now and again they sprang at one another, when the flashing of colour was that of two rainbows at war.

The hens looked on in amazement, and baby Tom took the opportunity to stick up his diminutive tail, but no one took any notice of him, not even his fond mother, who merely stared at the fighting cocks. As for the rival monarchs, they had no thought for anyone but themselves;



*Now and again they sprang at one another, when the flashing
of colour was that of two rainbows at war*

THE GENERAL AND BLACK JOE

and even if they had cast an eye upon Young Tom, I do not suppose they would have considered him of any importance, yet the time was to come when both elder gentlemen would have to take Thomas Junior into serious account.

But I am wandering from the duel. The battle raged on and on, and neither bird would cry "Enough!" Their pace slowed, many feathers were broken, but no blood had been shed, or seemed likely to be; so we decided not to interfere, but let them settle their own affairs, and fight it out. It seemed as if it would take them a long time to do so. On and on they went, now tired, very tired, but indomitably plucky, and each determined not to own defeat.

At last evening came—likewise the end of the battle!

A strange sight was seen as the sun sank in the west, namely the General running for dear life with Black Joe in hot pursuit. Tom was beaten,

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his bullying days were over, henceforward they would be but a memory of the past, and Joe was going to do the running now. Joe ran Tom all round the front garden and the stable-yard, into the farmstead, and away over the meadow. Then the victor returned, rather battered, but triumphant. He flew on to the roof of the potting shed, and there sang his hymn of victory. He shrieked and shrieked, his yells of joy echoing far across meadow and woodland. At long last he had turned the tables, the day was his, and he would let the countryside know of his triumph. I am sure all the parish heard him.

Presently Tom came home, creeping quietly back, with no swagger, no swank, and no triumphal yells. He did *not* go to roost in the walnut tree, but gave his old quarters a wide berth and retired discreetly to the roof of the stable. Subsequently he shifted to a fir tree, which afforded him a nice sheltered roosting-place, and the main bough of the walnut tree knew him no longer, at

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least not until moulting came round and wars were forgotten. It was a case of "Oh! how the mighty are fallen." What is more, he kept away from the kitchen garden, where Joe, who seemed to shimmer with pride, was strutting magnificently in the middle of the strawberry-bed. The General had indeed met his Waterloo, and henceforward kept to the front garden, where he used an excellent displaying ground under the shelter of some bushes. There were one or two slight tiffs afterwards, but only passing breezes, for Tom and Joe now mutually respected each other, and had established an understanding, namely that each had his territory and should keep to it. The one claimed the kitchen garden as his own and the other the front garden. But when the two staked out their claims they did so without regard for Tom Junior. He was only an insignificant youngster, less than the hens, less than dust in their eyes, and did not matter in the least. What did they reckon of the day when he should grow up? So all

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was settled, peace was declared and all was well, at any rate for a while—until Young Tom grew up !



Joe, the victor

CHAPTER SIX

EXIT MADAME GREY HEN AND ENTER RACHEL

A GREAT deal has been said about the General and Black Joe, but comparatively little has been related concerning their wives. Of course, being plain, dowdy people they were overshadowed by their magnificent lords. Who *could* look at Grey Hen, or Jane, when Tom was showing off? Yet they were quite as attractive in their way, and I was ready to weep when tragedy befell them.

Another spring had come, and Grey Hen resorted to the old place where she had hatched young Tom. She scraped and scratched at the foot of the tree, made a comfortable hollow, and therein, at daily intervals, laid no less than six eggs, which she proceeded to brood. All went well for some time, until hatching time approached,

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and then through the dark shadows of the night came danger. It came on neat padded feet, jumping the wire netting of the garden fence, and questing with keen nose through the shrubbery.

In the morning Grey Hen was missing, only her eggs being left, lying cold and neglected in the nest. We found her, or what was left of her, out in the field. She had been killed by a fox !

As for her son, Young Tom, now a big bird beginning to acquire some of the hues of the adult cock (peacocks as mentioned before do not get their full uniform until three years old), I cannot honestly say he appeared broken-hearted, or even showed any signs of grief ; but then he was much occupied with his own affairs, showing off his rudimentary train to the wild ducks and barn-yard hens, and keeping out of his papa's way ; besides, his mother had long since removed her sheltering wing and left him to his own devices. No doubt she considered that some nine months of mothering

EXIT MADAME GREY HEN

was enough even for such a youngster as Tom Junior !

Unfortunately, Grey Hen's tragedy was not the only one, for we had lost Old Jane. She met her fate one wild and stormy night, when a gale shook the walnut tree until its ancient branches creaked and groaned. What happened under the intermittent light of the moon, that peeped out now and again from between the hurrying storm clouds, cannot be told, for it is not known, but I think the old lady must have been blown out of the tree. At any rate, we found her in the morning lying dead in the stack-yard. The tiles had been knocked off the top of the barn roof, and she had her neck broken. Apparently she had blundered against the roof in the dark.

Jane left a son and daughter, the latter, Young Jane, sometimes called Jenny, of whom more by and by, and the former, a cockerel mentioned before as leading to Rachel ; for, not wanting so many cocks, we decided to exchange him for a hen.

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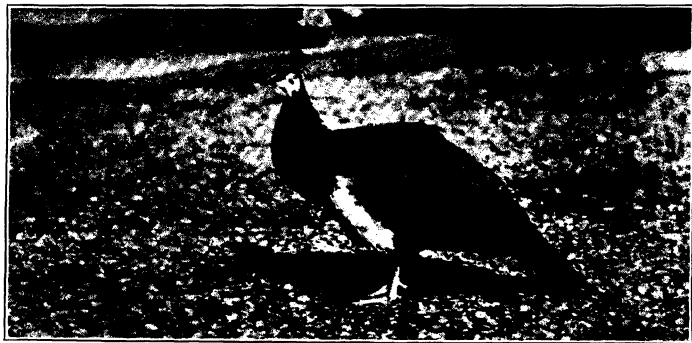
He departed, and a grey-brown lady, otherwise Rachel, arrived in his place.

Knowing how devoted peafowl are to their homes, remembering our troubles with Old Tom, and how loath he had been to settle down in a new place, we thought it would be wiser not to give the new-comer any opportunity to show off her walking abilities, so shut her up in a shed for ten days to forget her old home. As it turned out, I can only think that confinement sharpened her memories of it, and made her extra desirous to get back. At any rate, it did not prevent her walking off when she was released.

I have already mentioned that though peafowl are not great fliers they are splendid walkers, and Rachel, it seemed, was in a class by herself and a Marathon winner at that. She used her wings once or twice, but that was all. By the way, our birds rarely get on the wing, only flying up to roost and down again, and occasionally taking wing when alarmed; but it is indeed a sight to



Young Tom showing off to the wild ducks



A grey-brown lady named Rachel

EXIT MADAME GREY HEN

see them when they do, Tom sailing like an aeroplane above the tree-tops, his great train seeming to exceed the tail of a comet in length.

Well, the day came when Rachel was released, and mightily pleased she seemed to be to find herself free once more. Rachel was no exception to the rule that peafowl hate being shut up ; they just will *not* roost in buildings, and as for nesting under cover — no self-respecting peahen would dream of such a thing ! Hence imprisonment had been a sore trial to Rachel. She flapped her wings and danced with joy when at last she found herself out on the lawn. Then she began to look around. The other peafowl came and looked at her. Young Jane was not too civil, in fact she showed an unlady-like desire to be rude to the stranger ; but the gentlemen were as polite as such fine fellows should be, giving her gentle kisses of greeting, which she as gently returned. This ceremony of softly pecking the white kid-like skin around the eye is a most curious one, and the

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more often one sees it the more curious it appears. Watching the birds performing it, one cannot but believe it betokens kind greeting and affectionate regard—yet Rachel walked !

Had she taken Jenny's rudeness to heart ? I do not know. I can only say she went. We had all been watching her anxiously, but she seemed happy, and vigilance was relaxed, when she vanished. Find her we could not. We searched the farm, we hunted the woods, we walked too, and sought her far and wide, yet never a sign of her could we discover. Then we broadcast the news, per, first the local schoolmaster (nothing spreads news through a parish so quickly as telling the school-children) and then the village public, yet still Rachel was posted as missing. Lastly I put an advertisement concerning the lost peahen in the local newspaper. That brought Rachel back ! She returned under the arm of a man who had caught her in his garden on the outskirts of a townlet three miles away. He was suitably

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rewarded and drank long life and prosperity to her in a glass of whisky—a good strong dose too, as I know, for I mixed it. Thus ends episode number one ; now for number two.

Rachel returned to durance vile, being imprisoned for another ten days, but she had Black Joe to keep her company, for we had managed to lure him into the shed, as we thought if she really made friends with one of the cocks she would have something to anchor her, to take her thoughts off her old home, and prevent further wanderings.

At last we let them both out, when all went well for two days, during which we watched the new-comer as a cat watches a mouse-hole ; but again the moment vigilance was relaxed Rachel disappeared. The same measures were taken, once more the news was spread, and another advertisement inserted in the local paper, but this time she was away much longer. The first news of her came from a farm a mile to the south (her

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first expedition had taken her to a place three miles due north), but she had left it before I could get there ; then she was reported from another farm four miles to the west, where she had been feeding with the poultry, but again she did not wait for me to fetch her home. When I got there she had disappeared. Several of us beat the neighbouring woods, but it was all in vain. It seemed as if she had had information we were coming and had moved on ! I began to give up hope of getting her back. However, two days later she returned, not from the spot where I had been seeking her, but from one three miles *east* of our house, *i.e.* about seven miles “ as the crow flies ” from the farm where she had fed with the poultry.

Again she journeyed back under a protecting arm, but this time it was that of a gamekeeper, who had caught her beneath a trap he had set for taking up hen pheasants. He was a head-keeper too, so the errant lady's home-coming was proportionately expensive ; and as for the whisky, of

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course her health had again to be drunk, and it likewise rose in strength.

Once more the wanderer was imprisoned, and her term of detention increased ; but it was the old story upon her release, for she eloped at once. I declared I would not bother any more, as she would not stay, she could go where she list, but my resolution weakened when the telephone rang, and a voice said, " Is that Miss Pitt ? Have you lost a peahen ? There is one here, in the stack-yard, feeding with the fowls."

I hurriedly replied that I had *lost* one, and that I would motor over in the course of the afternoon and try and catch her. The place was two and a half miles away in a direct line, with the wide Severn between ; yet, as there were no other peafowl in the district it must be Rachel. What a worry she was, and I doubted if I should be able to catch her ; but still it might be possible to walk her down, for if you walk after a peafowl, not going too fast so as to make it take wing, but

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keeping it on the move, it soon gets out of breath and crouches in a bush. However, it was not necessary to try this with Rachel, for as I went out of the house to get the car I met a peahen, and it was not Jenny. It couldn't be Rachel! But it *was*! The runaway had returned of her own accord, strolling up to the front door, perfectly cool, collected and ready for a feed!

She never went very far again; she might go off for a day's outing, but evening found her walking back again. Seemingly she had had enough of travelling. Certainly she must have acquired a good knowledge of the countryside, for she had explored it in every direction. It is noteworthy that, as in the case of Old Tom, her attempts to return to her old home showed no trace of any homing instinct. She had come from the South of England, but her first effort was due north, and her subsequent outings took her to every point of the compass.

Poor Rachel did not stay with us very long, but

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in the meantime she settled down happily as one of the General's mates, for she attached herself to Tom, regardless of Black Joe, who tried in vain to draw her attention, making hundreds of eyes at her with his great halo of beautiful orbs.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JENNY

JENNY, it will be remembered, was Jane's daughter, and was originally called "Young Jane," but the double title gradually degenerated into mere "Jenny," by which designation she is now generally known. Though a plain brown hen, rather like a tabby cat in colour, she is a lady of great character and personality. From her earliest days she resented insults, and when Punch, the old wire-haired fox terrier, an amiable elderly fellow, somewhat stiff in the joints, so far forgot his usual good-nature as to snap testily at her when she thieved his food, trouble began, for Jenny vowed vengeance.

It was really her fault, for she ought not to have taken the dog's food, but all the peafowl seemed to

JENNY

think they had a right to the best bits from the dog's bucket.

Each evening after tea I went to the kitchen for a bucketful of warm soaked dog biscuit, and armed with this sallied forth to feed dogs, cats and ferrets. One call of "Punch! Bang! Tiny! Puss, puss, puss!" was sufficient to bring the dogs and half a dozen cats scurrying after me, with the peafowl running in the rear. Whatever business the peafowl had in hand, they dropped it on hearing the call. If Tom was showing off, he immediately abandoned his pose, allowed his fan to fall and close, shook his feathers into place, picked up his skirts (if you have ever watched a peacock getting ready to hurry you will have been struck by the ludicrous likeness to an elderly lady with long skirts gathering them in her hands before breaking into an amble), and raced to join the gathering. When there was anything to be had Thomas flung dignity to the winds.

It must not be thought from this that the

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peafowl did not get enough to eat, for they were well supplied with wheat and Indian corn, to say nothing of scraps gathered in the back-yard, and offerings condescendingly accepted at the front door. But, like many other creatures, not to say some people, they preferred what they got by the exercise of their wits to food which was provided for them.

Peafowl, dogs and cats would gather round me while I doled out the contents of the bucket. I always gave each peafowl a few bits for itself; but they were not content with this, and many a time did a cat or dog lose a tasty morsel in the very act of eating it. Lightning quick is the lunge of the peafowl, and I have seen Jenny snatch a piece of biscuit from the very claws of a cat. That the cat retaliated with a smack of its armed paw was of no consequence, Jenny having her booty out of reach. She loved this snatch and run game, and when an outraged cat spat angrily at her she merely sidled up to it, making little clucking

JENNY

noises, which is a peahen's way of saying, "Now don't you dare to give me any cheek!"

When you see a peahen going sideways, crab-fashion, and making that low cluck, you may be sure she is up to no good. When Jenny behaved thus to the cats she invariably followed it up by a vicious peck on nose or ear or head, in fact on some tender delicate spot, which caused poor puss to spring back, spitting more indignantly than ever, and finally flee the scene.

But Jenny had always got on well with the dogs, until the day she snatched a piece of biscuit from old Punch, and he was so annoyed that he snapped at her. Did he realise what trouble he was laying up for himself? I expect not, for otherwise I feel sure he would have let her have *all* his biscuit. She jumped back, out of his reach, and stared at him with an outraged angry gleam in her beady dark eye. Then with outstretched neck, and uttering that menacing "Croo! croo! croo!" she began to sidle towards him. Punch having

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vindicated, as he evidently thought, his right to the biscuit, was going on eating it. Indeed, he had finished that piece and begun another, when Jenny sprang at him, hitting him upon the head with her feet. Poor old Punch gave a startled yelp, for he had not seen the attack coming. He tucked his short tail between his legs, and fled down the stable-yard, waddling off as fast as age, obesity and short legs would let him, only pausing at the door of the place where he slept to see what had attacked him so suddenly and unkindly. Did he think I was the culprit? From the reproachful glance he cast in my direction I fear he held me to blame, probably thinking I had cuffed him for no good reason; but he soon found out who it really was that had given him such a smack, for Jenny was following up his retreat.

Vindictive retaliation was written on every feather of that peahen as she pursued the old dog, once more approaching him crab-fashion, and with little "croos" of rage. She was in a terrible

JENNY

temper, and yet it was all her own fault, for *she* took the biscuit. Poor Punch was really the aggrieved party, and ought to have been attacking her. However, Jenny “took the biscuit” in another sense, for she persisted in going for Punch, flying at him again in the most determined way, only desisting when the old dog bolted into his sleeping-place and stayed there.

Jenny came back to the feeding-place, still looking a little annoyed and ruffled, yet wearing a triumphant air; however, the others had eaten her share of the tit-bits, and I took care she got no extras, for she certainly did not deserve them.

It might be thought that the matter ended here, but it did not. Jenny having declared a vendetta against Punch was not going to give it up in a hurry. That she had been to blame did not matter a bit, or alter the malicious delight she took in persecuting the old fellow. She would watch and wait for him to leave his sleeping-place, and advance to meet

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him as he strolled up the yard, stepping sideways as before, and uttering her war-cry, that wicked though subdued "Croo, croo!" which means, "Now look out for yourself!"

She flew over the dog again and again, at first hitting him on the head, though when he, rendered desperate, snapped at her, and tried to grab her tail, she flew higher and out of his reach. Once Punch did get a tail feather; but he was no match whatever for her, and the best he could do was to retreat again, retiring to his sleeping quarters until the shrewish lady had gone off elsewhere.

Poor old Punch, for six weeks or more he had a dreadful time. He could not show his nose outside the building without spiteful Jenny coming after him, and life was hardly worth living. Fortunately for him nesting-time was approaching, and when her nest contained five large pale eggs Jenny lost interest in the feud. She had more important matters on her mind than teasing an inoffensive old dog, and for a while peace reigned; but later

JENNY

Jenny had some serious troubles that sorely tried her temper, and then warfare was resumed.

Jenny's woes were in connection with her family, four nice chicks, three being brown in colour and one of the white hue, which means the chick is really of the black-winged race. She was very proud of them, as well she might be, and cared for them as tenderly and lovingly as only a peahen mother can. But it was a cold, wet June, heavy rain fell day after day, and one of the chicks began to droop. In vain did Young Jane cuddle it beneath her wings, it had not the strength to live, for this baby, fitted for life under an Indian sun, could not face an English summer. The others were all right for a while, and seemed likely to do well. Jenny showed them how to fly up into the walnut tree, and took them to roost each evening, while by day they roamed the meadows in search of insects, until they became fair-sized birds, with well-developed wings, and able to fly excellently when the need arose.

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This latter fact has bearing on what happened next, which disaster was really due to the high-strung peafowl temperament, which occasionally makes the birds panic at some stupid thing. Despite their boldness, not to say their impudence, the peacock clan were easily upset by anything out of the ordinary, and when a noisy motor-lorry came down the back road to our farm buildings one morning, Jenny, her chicks, and the rest of the peafowl gave a few hysterical screams, took wing, and flew wildly over the barn. Tom came sailing into the garden, gliding down over the tree-tops, when the sun lit up his wide-spread wings, his blue-green neck and great tail, until he looked like something between a fancy aeroplane and a runaway rainbow. But what of Jenny and family? They had flown into the drive meadow, whence they presently re-assembled, still a little hysterical, and inclined to shout at nothing at all; then it was that I could not find all the chicks, for the family was one short. I looked for it,

JENNY

we all searched for the truant, but not a sign of it was to be found. We looked here, there, and everywhere, and yet could not discover the missing youngster. When night fell, and the peafowl retired to the great walnut tree Jenny had only two chicks with her, and number three was reported "as absent without leave."

That same evening I was rather anxious about the otters, for when I went to feed Madame Moses and Thomas Romeo Grievous Otter they did not seem so keen and alert as usual. When I stooped down and stroked Moses, she stood up on her hind legs and dabbed her nose against my cheek, giving me her usual kiss of greeting; but she was not much interested in supper, while as for Tom, he simply turned his nose up at the rabbit I had given him, and left it. I was greatly perturbed, and feared they were both ill, for when animals like otters go "off their feed" it is usually serious. However, I need not have worried, not about *them*

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at any rate, for all that was the matter was peachick, they had had a sumptuous supper !

The solution of the mystery, or rather the two mysteries, first the disappearance of the young peafowl, and secondly, the loss of appetite by the otters, only dawned upon me the following morning when I took the otters their breakfast. I then noticed some dark speckled feathers lying about their enclosure, and on looking around spied others. Then the truth, the horrid, tragic truth, was apparent. When the peafowl took fright and flew wildly in all directions, one fine youngster had flown farther than the rest, careering across the drive meadow, over the fence of the otters' pool, and landed inside the enclosure. Tom and Madame Moses did the rest ! The foolish young peafowl not only "went West," it went inside the otters.

Poor Jenny, she had no luck with that family, for she lost the other two youngsters later on, and this did not improve her somewhat peevish temper.

JENNY

Having forgiven old Punch, she vented her feelings in a vendetta against the cats, but the history of this feud must be kept for the next chapter.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MORE ABOUT JENNY

POOOR Jenny, her troubles *did* prey upon her nerves ! It had always made her cross when a cat took the tit-bit she fancied, but now she was extra spiteful, and would go out of her way to attack a cat that really had not interfered with her. Like old Punch, the cats found retaliation was useless. They might try and smack her with armed paws, but Jenny was too quick for them, pecking them on the nose, and jumping out of reach of their claws in less time than it takes to tell.

Black Joe and General Thomas, who seldom scrapped with the cats or dogs, watched these episodes with a detached air, and took the opportunity to get some extra bits of food, which

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Jenny would have annexed if she had not been occupied. They needed consolation for they were losing their beauty.

It was now late in the season, the cocks had begun to moult, and of all his fine train Old Tom had but two feathers left ; but Jenny, not to be defeated by circumstances, began to consider laying another clutch of eggs. This upset the General and Black Joe, who, when they discovered Jenny was nesting again, tried to do the proper thing and celebrate it by erecting their fans and strutting about. But they had not got any fans to put up ! Only a few miserable worn feathers backed by the plain grey tails, so the ridiculous sight was seen of the two cocks strutting about with nothing worth looking at to display, but strutting as hard as if they had. It proved what I have said, that peacocks do not put up their trains because they know the halo of eyed feathers is becoming, but because they get so excited they do it without thinking.

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But about Jenny's last lot of eggs—it was far too late in the year for her to be allowed to hatch them, so—I hardly like to whisper it!—we ate them for breakfast!

This should have upset the lady worse than ever, but as a matter of fact it did not. She seemed resigned to the fact she was not to bring up chicks this year, recovered her good temper, and proceeded to get on with her moult. For a while life was peaceful and uneventful in the peacock world, though society had become limited and with a far too great predominance of the male sex. Jenny was the only hen left, for Rachel had come to an untimely end, but there were three cocks, The General, Black Joe and Young Tom. The others took no notice of the latter, as yet, but he was fast becoming a full-fledged cock, and the day was coming when they would have to heed him.

Whether Jenny enjoyed being the only lady I cannot say; but as I have said, she regained her good temper, and had no unprovoked quarrels.



He was fast becoming a full-fledged cock

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simply the result of the overwhelming impudence of a Light Sussex cock which lived about the farm-buildings. He was a home-reared bird, and a fine specimen of his breed, but full of self-confidence, not to say over-weening pride. His "cheek" was great : he appeared to think himself not only lord and master of a harem of meek hens, but of the stack-yard and fold-yard as well. It was upon the manure heap in the latter that his arrogance was first corrected. Jenny, who had no dislike for manure heaps and other vulgar places of like kind, was scratching peacefully among the manure in search of hidden treasure, when the young cock came up behind her, and, taking her from the rear, without warning, flew at her, and knocked her over into the dirt and filth.

It was a dastardly deed, for she had been taken unawares, and given no opportunity to defend herself ; however, she quietly picked herself up, shook some of the dirt from her feathers, and regarded the offender. The Light Sussex cock

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was standing looking at her, as if laughing at his practical joke; but the joke was on the other side, as Jenny flew at him and knocked *him* over! He picked himself up, and with ruffled hackles squared up to her, but she gave him another, and yet another. He turned and made off, but Jenny was after him in a second, compelling him to turn and face her. In vain did he try to get away, she was too wroth to let him go, and each time he tried to run he had to turn about to defend himself, or take a heavy blow upon the back. It was a very dishevelled cock, with most of his impudence knocked out of him, who retired to the fowl-pen that evening; but there was yet more to come!

The next morning, when in the stack-yard taking a photograph of the Heavenly Twins (a couple of turkey-cocks, so-called, because they were anything but heavenly in their ways) I heard Jenny uttering her war-cry, "Croo! croo-oo!" and turned to see her chasing the young cock around the stack. The Light Sussex was to have further

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punishment. He dashed by me, his light-coloured legs flashing over the straw, in a way that suggested he never wanted to see a peahen again, and after him, as relentless as Fate, came Jenny. The turkey cocks gobbled their amazement and strutted towards the fray ; while Old Tom, who had been showing off under the sunny side of the barn, lowered his fan, and strolled across to see the fun.

Before quite an audience Jenny proceeded with her task, and once more drubbed the offender. He showed fight, ruffling out his hackles and squaring up to her, so she went at him harder than before. He ran off, darting behind the threshing-box and dodging round its wheels, but Jenny was hard at his heels, and gave him another blow. The turkey-cocks blushed with excitement at the fight, their wattles glowing crimson, as they went after the combatants, gobbling furiously the while. Meanwhile I tried to get a snapshot of the affair, and was firing off my camera when one of the Heavenly Twins turned his attention to me.



Jane picked herself up, and regarded the offender



Jane compelled him to turn and face her

MORE ABOUT JENNY

Apparently the sight of so much fighting had made him want to fight too. At any rate, the next thing I knew was that a gobbler was attacking my legs ! The following three minutes were too busy for me to see what Jenny and the Sussex cock were doing—I was occupied beating the turkey with a handy stick. Having walloped him into a proper respect for the human race, I returned to see Jenny bring the cock out of a refuge beneath the farm-tractor. It was obvious that he was ready for peace at any price, but the peahen was not. However, he had found unexpected allies. The turkeys, perhaps as a result of my use of the stick, had suddenly become conscientious objectors to war, and the two strutted down upon the combatants, charged between them, and drove one this way and the other that. The way they parted them and drove them in opposite directions was one of the strangest things I have seen. They gobbled to each other about it, while the cock got out of the way. He certainly owed them his

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thanks, if only for a temporary respite. Jenny, as we know, did not forget a grudge or forgive an injury, so he only put off his punishment. The following day she sought him again, and that time there were no turkeys to interfere. Though there were several Light Sussex cocks in the stack-yard, all similar in appearance, Jenny picked the right one, and saw that he received what he deserved.

The cock has not interfered with Jenny Peahen since, and is now a bird of meek and mild manners.

CHAPTER NINE

THE GREAT FIGHT

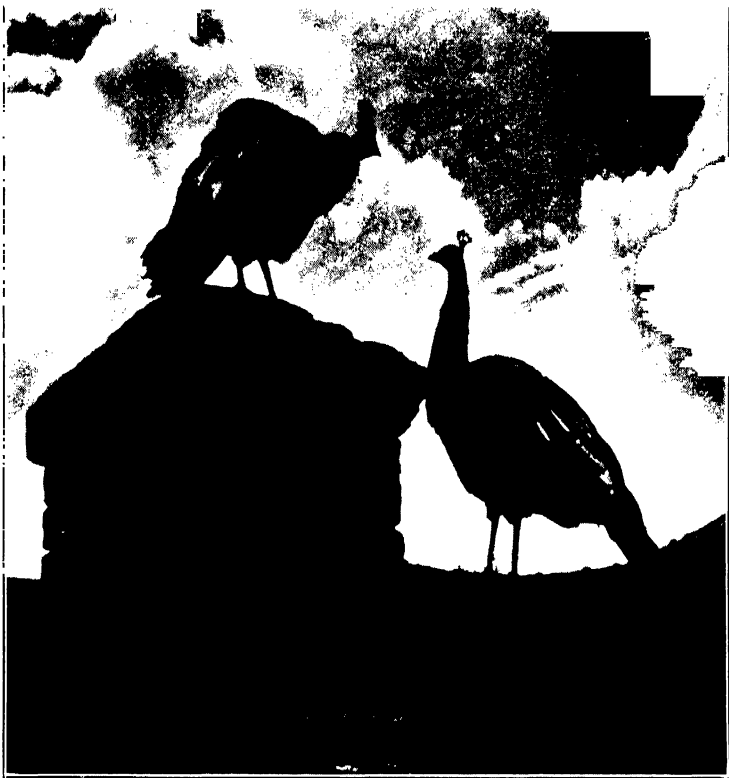
IN chapter four I told of Young Tom's early days, and how, beginning life as an insignificant little white chick, he grew rapidly under his mother's tender care into a big cockerel. But a peacock is not grown in a day, nor twelve months, and it took three seasons ere Tom Junior was a fully-apparelled gentleman, and came upon the peacock world in the glory of a full-length train.

His baby plumage of creamy white gave place to a speckled dress; and when twelve months old he moulted again, getting another speckled plumage, but one in which there was more colouring, so that he appeared rather darker, and was adorned with a green neck, to say nothing of

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the crowning tuft of little feathers on the head. Yet it must be confessed that the whole effect was not particularly striking; in fact, Young Tom was but a nondescript bird at this stage in his life, and no person, no beast, nor bird, saving, of course, his fond mother, paid any attention to him. The ducks, with whom he was in the habit of feeding, ignored him, taking no notice, despite the way he put his tail up at them. He would strut at them, and at an old white bantam that lived in the garden, just like his proud parent; but all young Tom had to show off was a small fan of dark tail feathers, covered by some light grey ones, growing from that part of his back which would later produce the great eyed feathers of the true train.

He at least got a little notice in one quarter. By meeting the old raven when Joe came forth from his stronghold in the coal-hole, making noises at him, strutting before him, and otherwise insulting and aggravating Joe, Tom compelled the raven to take note of him, and they had several



*Young Tom had grown into a fine bird under his
mother's tender care*

THE GREAT FIGHT

merry scraps. But the fact of the matter was that Tom Junior was generally ignored, and was nobody at all in the peafowl world. He was brought up like the children of days gone by, on the principal he should "be seen and not heard."

Another season passed by, and found Young Tom twelve months older, and about to celebrate his second birthday. He was now much altered, having become darker and acquired more colour. His neck was vividly blue, his breast had become green and black, and his train was beginning to develop, bronze and green feathers appearing upon his back. But yet he wore many pied feathers to remind him of his chicken-hood, and was far removed from the magnificence of his sire.

Old Tom strutted and displayed, his great fan shimmering about him, in happy ignorance of or indifference to his son. No thoughts of the rising generation disturbed him or caused him to lower his waving banner.

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However much he was neglected, Young Tom grew and developed. Whatever troubles befell the rest of the peafowl, *he* thrived and waxed daily in weight and feather. He became as big, if not bigger, than his father, Old Tom, and his plumage became darker and darker. The pied feathers were lost, all trace, save a few specks on the wings, of grey or white vanishing, as had all likeness to a certain little white chick. With the passing of his third winter Young Tom emerged as black as the blackest villain in a novel of blood and thunder, and with a real train sweeping behind him. And what a train it was too, such a length, and such colour! When he put it up it was nearer six feet than five feet in height. But where could he erect it?

Young Tom still had no standing in the peacock world. It is true that he was now an adult cock, and a truly magnificent specimen of the jappanned variety, who in point of looks threw even his proud sire into the shade, *but* he was nobody. He had

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no strutting ground, no territory, no wives, no anything. He was merely an unattached cock, as out of it as a lost dog, and whenever he put up his train the other peacocks ran him.

They took this much note of him now, that they chased him when he trespassed upon what they regarded as their ground, and as they thought most of the place belonged to one or the other, one or the other was always chasing him. Poor Young Tom had an unpleasant time, being chased from pillar to post, and getting no peace save when he went out walking in the fields. It began to prey on his mind, and he eyed first his parent and then Black Joe with wicked glances. But yet he dared not retaliate, he could not turn upon his elders and betters, and so must put up with it. However, everlasting troubles told upon his temper, for whichever way he turned he was sure to bring an irate senior chasing after him, and being always in "hot water" made him revengeful. As he could not peck Papa Tom nor Black Joe, he pecked the

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poultry, and no doubt got some satisfaction out of this.

Now did Young Tom, when he pecked an inoffensive hen unexpectedly on the head, say to himself, "How I wish it were father"?

Well, I do not suppose he put it to himself quite like that, but his glances at the two old cocks became more and more wicked. If looks could have killed, both senior peacocks would have died speedy deaths.

At last the climax came !

The storm burst comparatively quietly. Young Tom came strolling round the house and on to the lawn, whereupon Old Tom, who was standing, with his eyed halo beautiful around him, beneath the fir tree, stared in amazement at this impudent intrusion, and took a few steps in his direction. Young Thomas did not retreat, he advanced, and deliberately challenged the old bird. He paused, shook his great fan out, erected it, and strutted towards his sire. Tom senior seemed paralysed

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with amazement: for quite a minute he stood motionless, staring at this unparalleled sight—his son, the junior cock, the unconsidered nobody, who had always been kept in his place, displaying not only on the lawn but deliberately at him. Then a shiver of anger ran through the General, his feathers stood out, he lowered his head and elevated his tail, until his train too was erect, and he faced Thomas Junior with a glittering fan shimmering indignant passion about him.

A gleam of sunshine caught the two birds, and caught the vision of two great feathered fans, adorned with countless eyes, slowly pirouetting in front of each other. It was a sight to dream of! For the eyed feathers seemed to flash angry passion at one another.

At this moment Black Joe came into the garden, and seeing what was happening, walked up to see the fun. He found the two glaring unutterable things at each other; but even as he arrived they began to prepare for business, lowering and furling

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their fans, and beginning the solemn preliminary waltzing of the peacock fight.

Age had latterly began to tell on Old Tom, he had developed corns, which sometimes made him lame. Only that morning I had been watching him picking his way gingerly over the gravel, pausing half-way to raise one foot and inspect the sole, evidently looking to see what hurt so much. But now he put all this on one side. He quite forgot his corns when he found his son and heir trying to tread on his train, and turned and twisted as nimbly as a youngster. Round and round the two waltzed, sometimes to slow time and sometimes faster. Now their pacing was so slow and dignified that it hardly seemed credible that the combat was a serious one, while anon it became quicker, and there was no question of the furious passion that animated the fighters. Their turns and twists grew speedier, Old Tom revolving like a cockerel ; but Young Tom was really the quicker, and it was he who was first to spring into the air, a miracle



Young Tom was really the quicker, and it was he who was first to spring into the air



They met in mid-air, in a confusion of rattling feathers and flashing colours while Black Joe stood sedately eyeing them

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of flashing blues, greens and bronzes as he did so. He shot over the old bird, but did not actually strike him, and they faced each other once more.

Black Joe in the offing was mightily interested, and walked around the combatants with the critical eye of a referee. It looked just as if they were waiting for him to give the word for the second round to begin. Then they began again, with that seemingly endless revolving, in which each bird appears to be trying to step on his enemy's train, but when he is really trying to get in a good position to fly over and strike the foe. Unlike a barn-door cock, a peacock tries to take his opponent by surprise and from the rear. Hence the long manœuvring, each watching his foe, and at the same time trying to outwit him.

This time Old Tom was fully alive to Young Tom's intentions, he was not going to be caught napping a second time. When Young Tom at

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last tried again to fly over him, Old Tom flew up too. They met in mid-air, in a confusion of rattling feathers and flashing colours that left the senses bewildered and in doubt which peacock had the best of it.

Again there was a pause, while the referee, otherwise Black Joe, stood sedately eyeing them. From his placid, unruffled mien no one would have guessed that *he* could fight !

Then came the third round, the fourth, fifth and twenty-fifth, for the battle went on and on, raging through a long spring afternoon, up and down the lawn, across the drive, and back again. Sometimes one combatant would resort to strategy, pretending to run away, only to turn short upon the pursuer, and fly at him with greater determination than ever. To the casual glance they seemed likely to go on for ever, as no serious damage had been done, and they were yet sound in wind and limb. Young Tom, it is true, had got a scratch on his leg, which was bleeding a little,

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and Old Tom had broken a few feathers—but this was nothing !

However, watching carefully, I did see signs that age was telling on Old Tom. He no longer turned so nimbly, and Young Tom was usually first to fly up into the air. “ Young Tom wins ! ” we cried. “ It is two to one on Young Tom, now ! ”

“ Screech ! Scree-ee-ech ! ” shrieked Black Joe, as if endorsing our comments. Was Joe rejoicing over the coming downfall of his old foe ?

But the fight was not over yet, for Old Tom was a plucky bird. Despite his open beak and gasping breath, he strove to keep his son at bay. However, the twilight was falling, the long, long battle had tired him out, and at last he turned and ran, not in pretence, but because he had to. Away he went, away and away, through the stable-yard, into the stack-yard, and off across the fields. How Young Tom chased him, how vindictively he turned the tables, and paid off the scores from

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the days when the old bird had chased *him*! He was getting even now! Whatever the General had done to him, he would square the accounts at last.

He ran papa into the woods.

Then Young Tom came home inflated with pride and triumph: he sat on the stack-yard gate and shrieked so all the parish could hear him; he repeated his outcry from the stable wall, screaming so loudly that not only the parish but the county might have been aware of his victory; and finally he flew up to roost in the walnut tree, where Black Joe was already sitting, and screamed loudly enough to wake the dead.

But what of General Thomas? Well, he came home very quietly and discreetly, moving stiffly, and limping on his tender corns, looked at the peafowl in the walnut tree, went off round the house, and flew up into the fir tree, where he has roosted ever since.

I should have been sorry for him, but for

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recollections of the way he had behaved years ago to Black Joe, to say nothing of the manner in which he had treated his son and heir: whatever his troubles, he had brought them on himself.

CHAPTER TEN

“AND THEY ALL LIVED HAPPILY EVER
AFTER”

POOOR Old Tom ! Things looked bad, but they were not really so black as they seemed. For example, Joe quickly took some of the pride out of Young Tom. Tom Junior came down from roost the next morning, a trifle leg weary it is true, and somewhat battered of plumage, but filled with self-importance and vain-glory.

Black Joe, who had watched the great fight so carefully, eyed him in a doubtful manner, in a way that seemed to suggest he was saying : “ Now, be careful, young man, you may have trounced the old General, but I ’m not going to stand any nonsense from you ! ” and he didn’t.

It was not so long before I saw a race, in

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which Young Tom was the leader and Black Joe the pursuer ; and the former ran for all he was worth, racing with extended neck, and legs that twinkled over the turf, as Black Joe hurried him off.

Then it was, from his exile in the fir tree (he was late coming down from roost, being no doubt too stiff to bestir himself) that Old Tom gave tongue, yelling loudly, so that it sounded like shrieks of derisive laughter.

Though the despot had fallen, he had seen a sight which consoled him in his downfall, and I cannot doubt was mightily pleased. He cheered the racing couple on their way, and then descended, to seek the solace of some corn, bits of cheese, and other oddments at the front door, after which he went and put up his fan where he had his parade place on the lawn.

And what of the other couple. Well, Joe ran Young Tom until both were out of breath, and then they called a truce, for Joe did not seem

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anxious to push matters too far, the fact of the matter being that the great fight had established Thomas Junior as a somebody in the peacock world. He could no longer be ignored, and must be granted certain rights. He established an estate stretching from the garden pool into the kitchen garden with a strutting-place in the stack-yard, and no peafowl questioned it. Old Tom remained as lord of the grass in front of the house, and in possession of most of the stack-yard ; while Black Joe retained the greater part of the kitchen garden, and exercised the prerogative of putting up his fan in the stable-yard.

Thus were things adjusted, thus was everything settled, each peacock being lord of his own domain, chasing the other cocks off it, and expecting to be chased in his turn if rash enough to venture upon their estates. And within those bounds each peacock also established a right to respect from other feathered creatures, whether fowls or ducks, any impudence, as in the case of the cockerel

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who insulted Old Tom, being visited with swift punishment.

And when things were thus adjusted, and Young Tom had won his spurs—quite literally, for sharp ones appeared on his legs, also the respect of his fellows, and his place in the peacock world—things became quiet and peaceful, Young Tom and Black Joe even roosting side by side in the walnut tree. But the General was not so ready to forgive and forget. He might meet the other two cocks at the feeding-place, and in the friendly walks of the off season when trains are shed and all the peafowl go out into the fields, but roost with them no, that was a thing of the past. He retired to a fir tree in front of the house, and there he has roosted ever since, retiring each night to one of its main limbs, there to slumber in solitary splendour.

Does he feel his fall from absolute despotism? Well, I do not know, but it is certain he has consolations. It will be remembered that owing

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to one trouble and another the peahens grew less and less, being reduced at one time to only Jenny. Now one wife to three husbands would never do, for jealousy would be great, and the troubles worse than ever, so I set to work to import more hens. This was easier said than done, for peafowl, being delicate birds and not easy to rear, are difficult to get. The original source of supply was not available, for this "muster" had been dispersed on the death of its owner, only one hen, a shy, wild, nervous creature that could not be captured, being left on the farm. I was told I could have her if I could catch her, but was advised to bring not the proverbial pinch of salt to put on her tail, but a ton or two. Replying that I was short of salt, I tried different tactics and offered a farm-boy a reward if he could find the salt, when the wily youth got to work, and within a week the old hen was under lock and key.

"It is waste of time taking her over to your place," I was told, "she is too wild to stay."

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However, I went and fetched her, when came the amazing discovery that she was a hen of the scarce green-necked Burmese breed, a very handsome bird, almost as large as an ordinary cock, of a dark colour, with a green neck. What would our cocks say to a strange lady of this bigger breed? It was not, however, the cocks who viewed her with amazement, but Jenny, who was much taken aback at the sight of a new hen, giving her anything but a civil or lady-like reception. Jenny walked up to the Dark Lady (as she was forthwith named), fluffed out her neck ruffle and used rude words. But the Dark Lady was an aged dame, experienced in the ways of a hard world, and armed with spurs worthy of a cock; she just gave Jenny one taste of their quality, and there was no further trouble. Jenny took the hint, and the scrapping seemed to settle the stranger's nerves, which the journey had sadly upset. She looked at Young Tom, at the General and Black Joe, and must have decided to stay. She had lived nearly two

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years alone, and was no doubt pleased with their company; indeed, we might even go further and say it was a case of love at first sight. She had cast her glance at Young Tom, and it was to Young Tom she attached herself, nor did she, though so nervous of human beings, ever attempt to go off.

I have already, earlier in this book mentioned that peahens are good wives, and here was Young Tom supplied with a distinguished lady, but the poor Old General without a mate. Again I tried, and this time obtained from Sussex a typical Indian hen, who enters here under the title of Ann. She was a very nice bird, but her effect on Jenny was extraordinary. No sooner was she released from her travelling box, whence she sprang out upon the lawn, than Jenny went quite daft. She had one glimpse of the new hen, when her neck ruffles went on end, and she picked up her skirts and ran for dear life. She ran in a circle round the lawn, she raced in and out of the

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rhododendron bushes, she circled three times round a small tree, and we all, my mother, the stable-man, the new peahen, and Old Tom, who had strolled up, gazed in amazement. What could have happened to her ?

Seemingly it was but hysterics at the sight of a new recruit (it must be confessed that the peahens are like ladies of early Victorian times, somewhat given to the “ vapours ”), and after a few minutes’ running round she sobered down. She stopped her mad race and walked towards us, only giving two or three cackling shrieks as she did so, and paused near the new hen to give her a thorough inspection. Jenny did not think much of her ; she said so in low croaking remarks and whispered insults, which had little effect on the stranger, who was taking stock of her surroundings, and of the General and Young Thomas. The Dark Lady was in the distance, but she was too shy to come and see what the disturbance was about.

Ann continued to study it all, from the General

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and Young Tom down to us, while Jenny did her best to be offensive, inviting the stranger to fight, and generally behaving in a most unlady-like manner. Her early Victorian "vapours" had given way to a Georgian up-to-dateness of conduct that was far from becoming. The new hen was rather bothered by the strangeness of everything, but she was no pullet, to be sparred at by Jenny. Suddenly she turned upon her, and gave her a smack which startled Jenny, after which, looking much cheered up, she walked off to explore her new world.

Later in the afternoon I saw her in the stack-yard, where Tom was standing, with his fan spread out to the best advantage, his whole person trembling with emotion, every feather a-quiver, so that their eyes seemed living things, winking at the onlooker, as he turned, and returned, so that the new hen should not be out of view of his glory.

It must be confessed that she looked as bored

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as only a peahen can look when a cock will persist in showing off, and kept walking round to get behind him. This roused the General to a perfect frenzy. He swung about again, and vibrated his halo until the quills of the feathers rattled like hail falling.

Yet for all Ann's seeming indifference she must have given Old Tom some attention, for of the three cocks it was Tom she chose as a mate. No longer need he fret (if he ever did) for the late lamented Grey Hen and Old Jane, for now he had a young and charming wife, and, what is more, he did not stop here, but took another bride. This was Bob-tailed Susan. She was but a pullet, a young hen only twelve months old, who came from the East of England, and arrived minus her tail, hence the name which she bore ever after. How she lost her feathers was a mystery, and a quaint object she was without them, but all the cocks seemed to think her a charming young lady, and each in turn made wondrous eyes at her.

POSTSCRIPT

WHEN writing *Moses My Otter* I appended a postscript pointing out that otters were not suitable for everyday pets, and begging readers not to follow my example by making a pet of one. This time I must add a few words to exactly the opposite effect, namely that peafowl are pets that anyone who has a garden can keep with success. If any person wants a pet of equal intelligence and beauty let him try a peacock, and if his bird excels my General Thomas Peacock in wit and character it will indeed be an amusing and charming personality.

BOOKS BY FRANCES PITT.

- WILD CREATURES OF GARDEN AND HEDGEROW.
(Constable, 1920.)
- WOODLAND CREATURES.
(George Allen and Unwin, 1922)
- SHETLAND PIRATES.
(George Allen and Unwin, 1923.)
- WATERSIDE CREATURES.
(George Allen and Unwin, 1925.)
- WILD LIFE STUDIES.
(Nelson, 1925.)
- ANIMAL MIND.
(George Allen and Unwin, 1927.)
- MOSES, MY OTTER.
(Arrowsmith, 1927.)
- TOM, MY PEACOCK.
(Arrowsmith, 1928.)

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Young Tom displayed his fine fan to the very best advantage, choosing a dark rhododendron bush as a background, against which his rich hues glowed magnificently; yet Bob-tailed Susan paid him no heed, nor did she tarry in company with Black Joe. We found her later in the stack-yard with Old Tom and Ann, and thus it was settled, for she had given her young affections to the General.

So we come to the end of the story of General Thomas Peacock, to the end of the account of my old friend, his battles and adventures, for there is little more to say than is summed up in the old fairy story ending of "they lived happy ever after." Tom with his two wives is perfectly happy, as is Tom Junior with the handsome Dark Lady, and Black Joe with Young Jenny; while the settlement of the estates, so that each bird has his own territory, does away with trouble arising from trespassing. Now and again there may be a

world.

Let us trust the General
score years and ten to which all good peacocks
may aspire.

